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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore some of the differential consequences of student acts of brinkmanship for the student role and the teacher role. A concomitant concern was to investigate the relationship between teacher perceptions of student brinkmanship and teacher pupil control ideology. Three hypotheses were tested in two junior high schools--one traditionally organized that emphasized custodial pupil control, the other with team teaching and modular scheduling that emphasized humanistic control. The instruments used were Osgood's semantic differential technique and the Pupil Control Ideology Form. Contrary to expectations, the students in the custodial school were more euphoric about both student brinkmanship and their everyday classroom life than were students in the humanistic schools. As expected, teachers perceive acts of student brinkmanship as threatening to their social position in the school organization. The degree to which teachers perceive acts of student brinkmanship as threatening was directly related to the teacher's degree of custodial pupil control ideology. (Author/IRT)

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THE CONSEQUENCES OF STUDENT BRINKMANSHIP FOR THE SCHOOL ORGANIZATION

by

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and
Donald J. Willower

Introduction

Most veteran night club entertainers know that hecklers are a problem to be dealt with in order for their act to be successful. Hecklers in the night club audience often voice their disapproval openly, almost competitively. In the school setting, classroom teachers have been the natural target of student hecklers for generations. Hecklers in the student audience, whom we shall call "student brinkmen," unlike hecklers in the night club audience, usually attempt to disguise their antics in order to avoid punishment. Understood in organizational terms, student brinkmanship might be defined as assertive student behavior which attempts to challenge the school's authority system while avoiding its negative sanctions.[1]

Some Sensitizing Concepts

The following constructs are presented in the form of what Blumer has described as "sensitizing concepts," i.e., abstract ideas that when supported

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by particular empirical content produce a scheme for interpreting a given social phenomenon.[2] They have not been developed in a formal style nor with great precision. Keeping this in mind, we begin with the notion that there appear to be at least three categories of student brinkmanship: subversive obedience, tight-roping, and boundary testing.

Subversive obedience is rule obeying behavior in which the student follows a rule to the letter or in an exaggerated way in order to use the organization's rules to its own disadvantage. The "class lawyer" is always ready to insist on strict enforcement of the rules at the most embarrassing time for the teacher. The "class clown" is quick to mimick a robot when the teacher asks him to stand up straight. The "mock enforcer" jumps at the opportunity to repeat a teacher's reproof to a classmate. Wilson recalled that one student: " . . . could think of more offenses than Barnum had acts. If you warned him about poking another boy in the arm, he poked him in the ribs. If you told him to stop throwing spitballs, he threw erasers."[3]

Tight-roping is neither rule obeying nor rule disobeying behavior, but behavior which is difficult to define in terms of specific rules of the organization; rule vagueness is used as a means to avoid organizational sanctions. Student coughing or laughing in an exaggerated manner is very difficult for the teacher to formally define in terms of specific rule-breaking. Does he always cough like that, the teacher wonders? Did those books fall on the floor by accident or did the student push them there on purpose? The successful tight-roper is careful not to leave the teacher enough evidence to answer those questions. After all there are probably no rules against coughing, laughing, or harmless accidents.

Boundary-testing is rule disobeying behavior which is disguised in some way so that organizational sanctions are avoided. The "student banzai," of which there are many variations, is a boundary testing act based on the rationale that massive, simultaneous rule-breaking is very difficult for the organization to control. After all, it is very difficult to punish everybody and to call attention to such collective efforts by students may result in loss of face for the teacher. The "cattle stampede," was:

" . . . a former favorite in the sanctum of North Catholic's library, students started their 'hooves' to tapping, gently at first and finally sounding like a full-blow stampede with a few adolescent 'moos' thrown in for atmosphere."[4]

Figure 1 goes about here

As figure 1 shows, acts of student brinkmanship might be placed on a continuum with acts of passive compliance at one extreme and acts of aggressive noncompliance at the other extreme. Subversive obedience would represent the most aggressive acts of student obedience and boundary-testing would represent the most passive acts of student disobedience. Tight-roping would be placed somewhere in the middle of the continuum falling neither under rule obedience nor rule disobedience.

Purpose

Schools are organizations in which students must submit to an authority structure and adjust to a relatively rigid routine. Typically, an adversary relationship exists between the student subculture and the teacher subculture that accompanies differing definitions of the situation and the preoccupation of the professional staff with client control.[5] Emanating from this organizational setting are pressures which lead pupils to certain acts previously called "student brinkmanship."

The application of functional analysis to structural features of school organizations can be a worthwhile venture. The consequences of various structures can be viewed from the standpoint of the adjustment of certain positions and roles in their subcultural or organizational settings.[6] The purpose of this study was to explore some of the differential consequences of student acts of brinkmanship for the student role and the teacher role. A concomitent concern was to investigate the relationship between teacher perceptions of student brinkmanship and teacher pupil control ideology.

Hypotheses

For the most part the consequences of student brinkmanship were considered latent functions because they appeared to be neither intended nor recognized by the participants in the social system.[7] Three general propositions were advanced in order to examine student brinkmanship in terms of its latent functions. Each of these propositions were specified to a lower level of abstraction and presented in the form of three hypotheses which provide the basis for this research project.

The first proposition proposes that acts of student brinkmanship facilitate student role adjustment by making the student role more tolerable. Students must adjust to a role aggravated by the authority structure of the school and the rigid routine of everyday classroom life. The student is subordinate to the teacher who participates in a subculture often concerned with pupil control as an end rather than a means.[8] Brinkmanship provides students performing and observing the act with a means for venting anxiety

and hostility so that the taking of the student role becomes more tolerable. If this is the case, then student perceptions of student brinkmanship should vary inversely with their perceptions of everyday classroom life; that is, students who are more negative about classroom life should be more positive about brinkmanship. Attitudes were operationalized via euphoria-dyphoria (E-D) scores obtained using semantic differential techniques. Stated in these terms, the first hypothesis is:

> H1. There is an inverse correlation between the student E-D score for everyday classroom life and the student E-D score for student brinkmanship.

The second proposition is that teachers perceive acts of student brinkmanship as threatening to their social position in the school organization. While "blowing off steam" facilitates adjustment to the student role, it also aids the organization in keeping client hostility within manageable proportions. Goffman has noted that confidence men in criminal subcultures often employ similar structures in order to dissipate their victim's outrage.[9] In this light student brinkmanship helps the organization stablize to its internal environment.

However, it is doubtful that teachers fully appreciate this consequence of student brinkmanship. In schools where client control seems to be a paramount concern to the teacher, this mode of student expression, regardless of its possible adaptive consequences for the school organization, will be viewed by most teachers as a threat to their social positions in the school. If this is so, then teachers should perceive student brinkmanship as being relatively dysphoric in nature and students should perceive student

brinkmanship as being relatively euphoric in nature. Hence, hypothesis two:

> H2. In the student-teacher populations the mean teacher E-D score for student brinkmanship is less than the mean student E-D score for student brinkmanship.

The third proposition states that the degree to which teachers perceive acts of student brinkmanship as threatening to their social position in the school organization is likely to be related to the degree of rigidity or custodialism in their views on pupil control. A teacher's predisposition toward student brinkmanship is probably influenced by the teacher's pupil control ideology. Educator pupil control ideology (PCI) has been conceptualized on a custodial-humanistic continuum, and made operational through an instrument called the PCI Form.[10] The custodial teacher is characterized by stress on the maintenance of order, distrust of students, and a punitive, moralistic orientation toward pupil control. These teachers probably feel threatened by acts of student brinkmanship. The humanistic teacher's ideology is marked by an accepting, trustful view of students and confidence in their ability to be self-disciplining and responsible.[11] This type of teacher is probably less liable to perceive student brinkmanship as a threat. If this is the case, then teachers who are relatively custodial in their pupil control ideology will tend to perceive acts of student brinkmanship with a greater degree of dysphoria than teachers more humanistic in their pupil control ideology.

> H3. There is an inverse correlation between teacher PCI score and teacher E-D score for student brinkmanship.

Sample

In order to examine these hypotheses, student and teacher samples were drawn from two junior high schools; one located in Central Pennsylvania, and one located in Southern New Jersey. It was decided to utilize junior high schools because they are in a position of organizational proximity to both the elementary and secondary levels, and field study data collected in a junior high school organization suggested that the concept of student brinkmanship would be relevant to both teachers and students at this level.[12]

School one is located in an urban area of Central Pennsylvania with a population of approximately 60,000. The school serves approximately 1300 students and is structured in the conventional "block time" manner; the teacher-student ratio is about thirty to one and during later visitations, there appeared to be a strong emphasis on pupil control. As the assistant principal explained, a student's failure to bring a pencil to class was sufficient cause for referral to the office for disciplinary action. Both the principal and assistant principal seemed frequently to be talking to disciplinary referrals or their parents.

School two, with about 1200 pupils, is located in a suburban area of Southern New Jersey with a population of about 45,000. Team-teaching and modular scheduling serve as the mode of instruction. This junior high school receives its students from an elementary system which has a reputation for innovation and "open education." In addition, the school was using a system of overlapping sessions whereby eighth grade students attend in the morning session and seventh grade students attend in the afternoon session. Discipline referrals to the office seemed to be rare. Compared with school

one, the atmosphere at school two could almost be categorized as a "country club" type. The faculties of both schools and students from a single grade in each school participated in the study by responding to the instruments employed.

Instruments

Semantic Differential. Osgood's semantic differential technique was used to collect data. The semantic differential technique attempts to differentiate the meaning of a concept against a series of scales, e.g.

"My Everyday Classroom Life is . . ."

exciting___:___:___:___:___:___:___calm

sad___:___:___:___:___:___:___funny

interesting___:___:___:___:___:___:___boring

Each judgment represents a choice among a set of given alternatives and serves to localize the concept as a point in semantic space.[13]

A written description of typical acts of student brinkmanship served as one concept. Because this was to be an initial attempt to investigate the general concept of brinkmanship as a social phenomenon, no effort was made to study specific categories of brinkmanship. The student and the teacher respondents were asked to take the role of a student or teacher present when this type of behavior takes place and express their reaction via the semantic differential. In addition, students were asked to complete the same semantic differential for the "everyday classroom life" concept.

The semantic differential used in this study, the E-D Scale, attempted to examine semantic space long a "euphoria-dysphoria" continuum. Six scales; exciting-calm, sad-funny, humorous-serious, boring-interesting, varied-monotonous, dull-witty, were selected to make up the bipolar items of the "euphoria-dysphoria" semantic differential. Based on previous factor analysis by Osgood and others, the words exciting, funny, humorous, interesting, varied, witty, were selected to represent the euphoria end of the continuum. The words calm, sad, serious, boring, monotonous, dull, were selected to represent the dysphoria end of the continuum. The polarity of every other bipolar item was reversed to avoid response bias.[14]

A seven step scale has been shown to be appropriate for use with students beginning at the fourth grade.[15] The response categories for each scale were scored 3, 2, 1 for the euphoria side of the scale, -1, -2, -3 for the dysphoria side of the scale and zero for the middle space. The six item scores were summed to provide a single test score.

Pupil Control Ideology (PCI) Form. The teachers were asked to respond to the student brinkmanship E-D Scale only and the PCI Form. The PCI Form taps the pupil control ideology of educators along a continuum ranging from "custodial" at one extreme to "humanistic" at the other extreme.[16] It consists of twenty items with five response categories for each item ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree." Item scores are summed to provided a single test score. Higher scores are more custodial and lower scores are more humanistic.

Respondents. The research instruments were completed in usable condition by 170 ninth grade students from school one and 121 seventh grade

students from school two Forty-six of fifty-nine teachers from school one and forty-six of fifty-one teachers from school two returned forms in usuable condition. The instruments were administered to a sample of students at school one during a study hall and to a sample of students at school two during an activity period. Teachers at both schools responded to their forms during faculty meetings.

Results

As noted early, the two schools involved in this study appeared to differ; we suspected that the professional staff at school one would be more custodial than the professional staff at school two. A calculated t value of 2.71, significant at the .01 level with 90 degrees of freedom, was produced by comparing the teacher PCI mean scores at schools one (60.2) and two (54.9). The magnitude of this difference was not unlike differences reported in a previous investigation of groups of teachers judged to be custodial and humanistic.[17]

The first hypothesis predicted that there would be an inverse correlation between the student E-D score for everyday classroom life (EDC) and the student E-D score for student brinkmanship (EDB). A Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was utilized to test this hypotheses. The computation of r yielded a value of .22, which was significant at the .001 level. However, since there was a positive relationship between the two variables, the hypothesis was rejected.

The calculated value of r for students from school one was .18, significant at the .05 level; for female students the value of r was .44, significant at the .001 level and for students having a positive EDC Scale

score the correlation coefficient was .27, significant at the .001 level. The correlations computed for students from school two, male students only, and students having a negative or neutral EDC Scale score were not significant.

In order to probe more thoroughly the relationship between student perceptions of student brinkmanship and student perceptions of their everyday classroom life the following additional hypothesis was tested using Fisher's Paired t-test.

> In the student population, the mean E-D score for student brinkmanship is greater than the mean E-D Score for everyday classroom life.

Since direction was predicted, a one-tailed test for significance was employed.

For this hypothesis the t value calculated for all students was 1.70, significant at the .05 level with 290 degrees of freedom. For students in school one it was 2.34, significant at the .01 level with 169 degrees of freedom. For males it was 1.72 significant at the .05 level with 148 degrees of freedom. The t for students having a neutral or negative EDC Scale score was 9.45, significant beyond the .001 level with 96 degrees of freedom. The t tests computed for students from school two and for female students were not significant, while students having a positive EDC Scale score produced a t score of 4.97, significant beyond the .001 level with 193 degrees of freedom, in the opposite direction. Table 1 presents these data. The N's given in this and the next table apply for the various subsample calculations reported in this paper.

Table 1 goes about here

According to this analysis, even though students are generally positive in their evaluation of their everyday classroom life, they were significantly more euphoric about student brinkmanship. Students at school one, the custodial school, were significantly more euphoric about student brinkmanship than their everyday classroom life. Students in school two, the humanistic school, exhibited no significant difference in their perceptions of student brinkmanship and their everyday classroom life. Note that students in the custodial school were considerably more euphoric about both student brinkmanship and their everyday classroom life than students in the humanistic school.

Male students were significantly more euphoric in their evaluation of student brinkmanship than their evaluation of their everyday classroom life. For female students there was no significant difference between perceptions of student brinkmanship and everyday classroom life. The mean EDB scores for males and females were quite close. However, females tended to have a somewhat higher mean EDC score than males and this difference, although not significant, probably accounted for the disparity between the two groups.

Students with a positive EDC score were significantly more euphoric in their perceptions of everyday classroom life than in their perceptions of student brinkmanship. Students with a neutral or negative EDC score were significantly more euphoric about their perceptions of student brinkmanship than their perceptions of their everyday classroom life. This was essentially the relationship predicted in the first hypothesis. However,

the fact that students with a positive EDC score were more euphoric about student brinkmanship than students with a negative or neutral EDC score at least partially explains the positive correlation derived in the test and rejection of the first hypothesis.

Taken item by item, students felt that student brinkmanship was "more exciting," "more humorous," and "more monotonous" than their everyday classroom life. Students at school one, the most custodial school, felt that student brinkmanship was "more exciting," "more humorous," "more interesting," and "more witty" than their everyday classroom life. The students at school two, the more humanistic school, felt that student brinkmanship was "more humorous" and "more monotonous" than their everyday classroom life. It is interesting to note the relative congruity in perceptions of students at the more custodial school.

Male students felt that student brinkmanship was "more exciting," "funnier," and "more humorous" than their everyday classroom life. Female students felt that student brinkmanship was "more humorous" and "more monotonous" than their everyday classroom life. There was an apparent lack of incongruity in the feelings of males as compared to the feelings of females.

Students with a positive EDC score felt that student brinkmanship was "calmer," "sadder," "more boring," "more monotonous," and "duller" than their everyday classroom life. Students with a negative or neutral EDC score felt that student brinkmanship was "more exciting," "funnier," "more humorous," "more interesting," "more varied" and "wittier" than their everyday classroom life.

The second hypothesis predicted that the mean teacher E-D score for student brinkmanship would be less than the mean student E-D score for student brinkmanship. A t-test was used to test this hypothesis. Since direction was predicted a one-tailed test for significance was applied.

The value of t calculated to determine the significance of the difference between the mean EDB score for students and the mean EDB score for teachers was 8.65, significant beyond the .001 level with 381 degrees of freedom. The computation of t for various subsamples yielded values ranging from 2.39 to 9.72, all of which were in the predicted direction and significant at the .01 level or better. Table 2 presents relevant data.

Table 2 goes about here

The third hypothesis predicted that there would be an inverse correlation between teacher PCI scores and teacher E-D scores for student brinkmanship. The Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient was computed to test this hypothesis. The value of r calculated for the entire sample was -.33 significant at the .01 level. However, the correlation for teachers at school one was not significant, although it was in the predicted direction. Teachers at school two produced an r of -.39, significant at the .01 level. See table 3 for data relevant to this analysis.

Table 3 goes about here

Even though teachers at school one had a significantly higher or more custodial PCI mean score and a significantly more dysphoric mean score for student brinkmanship than teachers at school two, the predicted

correlation did not materialize for teachers at this school. This apparently was caused by a bunching up of EDB scores in the dysphoric direction for teachers at school one, the more custodial school.

Discussion

The first hypothesis, which posited a negative relationship between student assessment of everyday classroom life and brinkmanship, was rejected. This occured, in part at least, because a classroom life received a relatively euphoric evaluation from students. At the same time, brinkmanship was perceived more positively than classroom life. This was particularly true of students holding neutral or negative views of everyday classroom life, but resulted from their negative attitudes toward classroom life rather than their positive views on brinkmanship. In fact, students with a positive perception of classroom life were substantially more euphoric about brinkmanship than their fellows having a low opinion of the classroom.

The relationship between classroom life and brinkmanship clearly is more complex than we at first thought. For some students, brinkmanship may be an integral part of classroom life and their assessments of both may be interwoven. Others may be sufficiently alienated from school so that the comic relief afforded by brinkmanship is lost on them, eclipsed by their environmental estrangement. Student brinkmanship and its consequences apparently must be viewed in terms of a larger context that includes the dominant structures and control style of the school as well as characteristics of the incumbents of the student position. In any case, the general

proposition that brinkmanship facilitates student role adjustment by making the student role more tolerable is too simple, perhaps even too facile.

With respect to the second hypothesis, the analysis of the data indirectly supported the contention that teachers perceive acts of student brinkmanship as threatening to their social position in the school. While students view brinkmanship positively teachers view it negatively. In terms of hypothesis three, the degree to which teachers perceive acts of student brinkmanship as threatening was directly related to the degree of teacher custodial pupil control ideology. While teachers exhibit dysphoria over student brinkmanship, influenced in part by a concern for pupil control, this type of student behavior may have positive consequences for the teacher role. It is quite possible that student brinkmanship acts as a functional equivalent for more serious forms of student misconduct. As such, brinkmanship may serve as a safety valve and, in the long run, foster stability.

Teachers probably adapt to acts of student brinkmanship differently. The teacher who develops into a "put-down" artist may be responding to quite different social conditions than the teacher who learns to integrate the student act into the learning situation. Further, some teachers may be more "brinkable" than others. In this connection, when data were gathered in this study, students sometimes felt compelled to write the name of their teachers in the description of brinkmanship at the head of the E-D Scale. The same names appeared repeatedly in this spontaneous student response.

Just as certain individuals may be brinkable prone, perhaps the phenomenon is more likely to occur in certain kinds of organizations.

Brinkmanship theory may find application in hospitals, prisons, industry, the military, and the family. In addition, there is the possibility of applying it to different organizational positions. What about teacher brinkmanship with respect to the authority system of the school organization?

Next, we turn to an unexpected but intriguing result. Students at school one, the more custodial school, were substantially more euphoric about both student brinkmanship and everyday classroom life than the students at school two, the more humanistic school. This finding seems to indicate that custodial or humanistic structure may produce certain unanticipated consequences for students and the school organization. The difference between the student samples might be speculated about in terms of environmental robustness.

Environmental robustness or high dramatic structure in an organization probably serves a tension producing function. These tension producing structures, just as in great theatrical performances, provide students with a focus for empathic involvement. In the traditional school organization final exams, the big game, or strict discipline might be everyday examples of these tension producing structures. The possibility exists that "alternative" educational organizations, in an attempt to develop tension reducing structures, have in some cases created a sterile environment, deficient in dramatic content for students. An environment which is anything but robust. If this is the case, it suggests that alternative schools require structures consistent with their goals, but functional equivalents for the robust structures of more traditional schools.

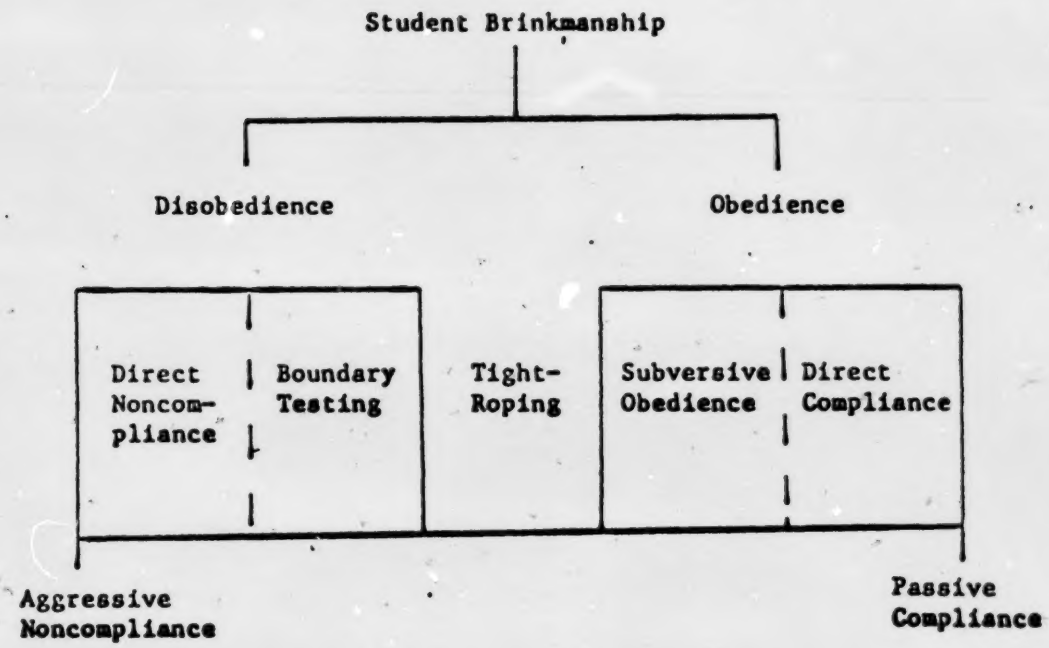

Figure 1. Compliance Continuum.

TABLE 1

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MEAN E-D SCORES FOR STUDENT BRINKMANSHIP AND EVERYDAY CLASSROOM LIFE

	EDB		EDC				
Samples	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	t	N	p[a]
All Students	5.2	7.4	4.2	8.0	1.70	291	.05
School One	7.4	7.3	5.6	8.7	2.34	170	.01
School Two	2.1	6.4	2.4	6.6	-0.34	121	NS
Males	5.3	7.4	3.8	7.6	1.72	149	.05
Females	5.1	7.5	4.8	8.4	0.56	142	NS
Positive EDC	6.1	7.5	8.9	5.0	4.97	194	.001
Negative or Neutral EDC	3.5	7.0	-4.7	4.1	9.45	97	.001

[a]One-tailed test.

TABLE 2

A COMPARISON OF MEAN STUDENT AND TEACHER
E-D SCORES FOR STUDENT BRINKMANSHIP

Samples	EDB $\bar{x}$	S.D.	t	N	p[a]
Students	5.2	7.4		291	
Teachers	-2.1	5.4	8.65	92	.001
School One:					
Students	7.4	7.3		170	
Teachers	-3.7	4.9	9.72	46	.001
School Two:					
Students	2.1	6.5		121	
Teachers	-0.5	6.2	2.39	46	.01
Male Students	5.3	7.3		149	
Teachers	-2.1	5.7	8.15	92	.001
Female Students	5.1	7.4		142	
Teachers	-2.1	7.3	7.89	92	.001

[a]One-tailed test.

TABLE 3

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TEACHER E-D SCORES
FOR STUDENT BRINKMANSHIP AND
PUPIL CONTROL IDEOLOGY

Samples	r	r^2	N	P <
All Teachers	-.33	.112	92	.01
School One	-.15		46	NS
School Two	-.39	.151	46	.01

Notes

1. Joseph W. Licata, and Donald J. Willower, "Student Brinkmanship and the School as a Social System," Educational Administration Quarterly, forthcoming, much of the present paper is drawn from this source.

2. Herbert Blumer, "What is Wrong with Social Theory," American Sociological Review 19 (1954): 3-10.

3. Charles H. Wilson, A Teacher is a Person (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1956), pp. 154-155.

4. Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) Press, 8 September 1974.

5. D. J. Willower, "The Teacher Subculture and Rites of Passage," Urban Education 4 (1969): 103-114.

6. D. J. Willower, "Educational Change and Functional Equivalents," Education and Urban Society 2 (1970): 385-401.

7. R. K. Merton, Social Theory and Social Structure (New York: The Free Press, 1968), pp. 104-109.

8. Willower, "The Teacher Subculture and Rites of Passage," pp. 104-114.

9. Erving Goffman, "On Cooling Out the Mark," Psychiatry 15 (1952): 451-454.

10. D. J. Willower, T. L. Eidell, and W. K. Hoy, The School and Pupil Control Ideology (University Park: Penn State Studies no. 24, 2d ed., 1973), p. 5.

11. Ibid.

12. D. J. Willower, and R. G. Jones, "Control in an Educational Organization," Studying Teaching, J. D. Raths, et al., eds. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1967), pp. 18-19.

13. J. G. Snider and C. E. Osgood, eds., Semantic Differential Technique (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., 1969).

14. Ibid.

15. J. W. Barnard, "The Effects of Anxiety on Conotative Meaning," Child Development 37 (1966): 464.

16. Willower, Eidell, and Hoy, pp. 10-11. Information on the validity and reliability of this instrument can be found in this source.

17. Ibid., pp. 13-14.

18. This topic is considered at length in D. J. Willower and J. W. Licata, "Environmental Robustness and School Structure," forthcoming.